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ABSTRACT

The author describes a Swiss special school program for visually handicapped children, briefly comments on the concept of integration, and discusses current endeavors to make practical, appropriate integration work. Considerations for more comprehensive integrated programing are listed. (Author/SBH)

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INTEGRATING EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN INTO THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

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In making this portion of our group-presentation, I would like to proceed in the following manner. First, it seems appropriate to describe my school-program. Secondly, I will comment briefly about "integration". Thirdly, I will present the current endeavors of my school to make "practical, appropriate integration" work. Fourthly, let me share with you some related hopes and aspirations, whose realizations we feel would make our program more effective.

The Special School of the City of Zürich for Visually Impaired Children is located in Zürich, Switzerland, and is one of two day-schools for visually impaired children in the entire country. Although the city of Zürich is responsible for and runs the program, the school is attended by children from the whole canton (state) of Zürich; the communities from which these youngsters come as well as the national insurance program for handicapped persons contribute, proportionally, their financial share. Though several children live in the immediate neighborhood (and for them the length of the school-way affords little problem) most live some distance away from school and travel by train, bus, tram, private car and/or taxi in order to reach us. The learning of the school-way, individualized as

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it must be, is a challenge to the teamwork among child, family and our program.

The school is a small one - 24 children are included in first to sixth grades and in the beginning of an upper school (7th to 9th grade) program. More than half of the youngsters may be called multiple-handicapped. (This includes - beyond various degrees of visual ones - problems re: thinking, relating to others, moving, perceiving, etc.) The staff is made up of three full-time teachers in the elementary school (one of whom is also director and began the program in 1960), a teacher for the upper school and eight part-time teachers who work with the youngsters in the areas of: speech, handwork, additional braille instruction, rhythmics, special physical education, typing and music. An important component of the team are the two ladies who staff our meal-service and related living skills-leisure activities program. The school day begins at 9:00 and ends, four days weekly, at 3:30. (On Wednesday, school ends at 11:30 - there is none on Saturday.) Most children eat at school. The older youngsters begin classes again at 1:00 PM and the younger ones have a supervised play-time hour.

Basically our curriculum is that of the general school-system of Zurich. We have the overall same academic goals - added to which are others, having to do with the whole range of personal/social functioning as well. As will no doubt sound familiar to all present, we're concerned with the whole child - his ability to think, to care for his own needs, to act independently and appropriately, to relate positively to people, to be constructively curious, to use his existing perceptual abilities in increasingly meaningful manner, to move about in all kinds of space. In

view of these vital educational considerations - indeed so important as the strictly academic - we're becoming increasingly aware that most of our students need more time to complete their school program. We're beginning to talk more in terms of levels of accomplishments - to be attained, as necessary, within varying time frames - and are discussing this with the parents. A present concern, as well, is the development and use of a reporting system to parents (one to be used, too, with other schools and programs) whereby the child's strengths and weaknesses, his accomplishments and lacks/needs, can be communicated - then used as the base for the further planning of his program.

Our school includes children with a range of visual ability - as well as those who are totally blind. Those who see best, however, are still sufficiently visually impaired that they need help of various kinds (the learning of developmental use of residual vision, optical aids, special apparata, perhaps braille) in order to most benefit educationally. As was already mentioned, many have multiple problems, not just visual ones. That most come to us, at age six or seven, functioning as well as they do is a real tribute to the effective reach of our area's program for preschool visually impaired youngsters. This program - begun in 1960 and coordinated by a parent-consultant employed by the local parent-association - goes into action as soon as a child is referred to it as visually impaired. Two itinerant workers bring knowledgeable, regular help to children and their families in the homesetting. A carefully planned and executed rhythmics program is available for those felt to benefit from it. (This begins, generally, at age four and affords for many the first kind of group experience outside the family.) Other types of therapies and learnings are provided

as needed with chief aim the optimal functioning of the individual child and of his family - granted the importance of the visual impairment. When a given youngster reaches appropriate age and functioning levels, he generally enters his neighborhood kindergarten - with backup helps given the kindergarten teacher through the pre-school team. So begins the first stage of integrating participation, involving the visually impaired preschool child with so-called normal children.

Our school is located, physically, at three different spots - all are geographically near one another. When I first joined the staff six years ago, we were crowded together - for all aspects of our programming - in one tiny building. Just two years ago there was chance to relocate. After consideration, the option of moving into our own large building was laid aside and the decision was made that we would locate our older students in a neighbourhood schoolhouse in whose classes some of our youngsters already were taking part. A pavilion with two classrooms was then erected on the small campus of the same little school and here our younger students now are. Our school diningroom and classrooms now used for different short-term instruction purposes remain in the tiny building where the school began. A walk of five minutes brings students from the pavilion or neighbourhood schoolhouse to the lunchroom. En route we go through a gardens-area which is also residential. It's pleasant and we can enjoy the chance to greet neighbors as we walk.

With this basic orientation to our school, let us now turn to a brief consideration of "integration", generally - whereby I hope to resume its importances and certain ramifications thereof, relating to "practical, appropriate integration".

Of all the themes relating to education, none seems to be more of interest, more thought-provoking, more controversial than that of integrating exceptional children into the regular classroom. This is often spoken of in terms of extremes and almost any contention, in its name, can be proven true by reference to a specific example. That "integrating" means diverse things to diverse people is clear. In regard to this presentation, given as it is before an audience of persons from many countries, representing numerous ways of life and educational realities, I would like to use this term as follows (with "exceptional children" defined by each country and its educational system) ... Integrating exceptional children into the regular classroom refers to the meaningful involvement of such youngsters into the ongoing regular education program to whatever extent is feasible and beneficial in a given instance - with ultimate goal the optimal academics and social/personal learning/experiencing of each child. Within the framework of such a loose definition all things are possible and this, it seems to me, is what's important and enabling. If one begins with the mandate that so many hours daily are required to define "integration" - or that a certain administrative structure is necessary or that it must begin at a definite point in a child's education - or that a prescribed support-structure must be operating in terms of teaching helps - the tendency may well be to give up before action ever takes place. Once somethings is begun, there's a certain momentum that develop; directions unfold and are unfolded - thoughts and actions, as well as convictions re: philosophy grow commensurately - and much can be accomplished whose details were scarcely thought of, initially. The question may well be, however, why begin? Basically, the answer will

include the need for persons of differing abilities, make-ups, characteristics to get to know each other from earliest childhood - so that they can accept, appreciate and live with each other throughout their lifetimes.

The integrating of exceptional children into regular classrooms; then, must first be found important in order to be put into action. Once this is the case, a start can be made at whatever program level - for whomever - for whichever length of time is manageable - for whatever appropriate content. Whether such an approach begins with administration or with a given teacher/school it can effect a beginning - upon which further planning/actions/organisation can be founded. (The mechanics of starting will vary from country to country and will be known by the individuals concerned.) That this may involve children with diverse kinds of exceptionalities is, almost certainly, obvious. Most important is that children have an integrating experiencing together - that this is begun so practically in terms of the individual situation that success is bound to occur - and that this kind of programming is nourished, developed, expanded, as fitting to each given educational situation and structure.

Within the framework of what has just been said, I would not like to present the current "practical integration" endeavors of the School for Visually Impaired Children in Zurich. We have made a modest beginning (underway for sometime in somewhat limited fashion) which is now in a state of flux, because we aim to strengthen it (in ways to which I'll refer at the end of this presentation.) As an overview, let it be said initially that almost all of our students attend - to some degree - the regular classes in nearby schoolhouses. For several this is a matter of one or two hours weekly - for others it means more than half of the school week.

For still others, the hours-count lies in between. In order to be specific, I would like to comment briefly re: each child in the group of seven whose coordinating teacher I am. These youngsters are termed first and second graders - but the ability range is great and the academic/personal-social functioning levels are equally diverse. Two of the group (print-readers - and with good useful vision, generally) are indeed second graders; they spend almost the total week in the regular second grade in our nearby schoolhouse. The one first grader (with good useful vision - and a print reader) is in the regular first grade more than half of each week. One youngster with severe multiple problems (also totally blind), now four years at our school, is experiencing - begun a year ago - another kind of integrating activity. She attends two mornings weekly the school for retarded children in our neighborhood (Heilpädagogische Hilfsschule) and for the first time is knowing the feeling of doing at least as well as the others in her group! Of the three remaining youngsters, one (totally blind) is academically able but socially immature. A year ago he attended the regular first grade a short while (on an hour basis) and it was felt not rewarding enough for him - at which point he returned full-time to my group. The second of this nucleus of three, whose time is spent primarily with me, has had as yet no regular classroom-integrating experience. Prime concerns 'til now have been helping him to learn to live within and benefit from a small-group experience. (His problems, only in part visual, include those in personal-social development, speech, motor and perceptual areas.) The last in our group of seven is a friendly, thoughtful, socially-able child (with the ability to perceive light in one eye) whose motor difficulties have made the reading and writing of braille a real

challenge for him. He is pleased that he now attends weekly for one hour the language arts lesson (primarily oral) in the regular second grade nearby.

The foregoing presents only the bare bones in regard to the "practical integrating" of a portion of our student-body. Each of us three full-time teachers initiates our own such programming - based on the individual abilities and needs of the children in our groups and the realities of the other classroom situations in which the integrating takes place. We develop and supervise this part of a given youngster's schooling - and serve as resource teacher to the regular teacher as far as this is currently possible.

We are now at a point where we can continue in the same vein, experiencing varying degrees of success within a somewhat narrow framework of functioning, or we can give affirmative consideration to certain relevancies which should enable us to have a more comprehensive integrated reach. In actuality, we are studying all aspects of our total program with the intention to strengthen curriculum, reporting and staff teamwork as well as other dimensions. In specific regard to integrated programming, however, the aspects needing new or further consideration are the following:

1. should <u>all</u> of our children experience integrating programming? If so, why - and to what degree?
2. how can we more effectively integrate our children so that there is appropriate social as well as academic experiencing gained?
3. how can we better maintain ongoing contact with the regular classroom teachers? Could an additional teacher - an itinerant

one - be employed to take over such responsibilities, leaving those of us classroom-based free to devote our energies to the children within our walls.

4. for some children, integration into the regular classes in their home communities is called for and could be well managed if there were an itinerant teacher to serve as back-up person for them.

5. practical integration calls, too, for integrating a given child on the basis of actual functioning, actual needs and existing abilities, and not simply in terms of number of years in school, reading level or social prowess. Putting this knowledge into effective operation is of great importance.

6. in the last year several volunteer workers have given regularly of their time to help the younger children with certain activities. Perhaps this assistance can be so utilized as to further integrated programming.

7. more meaningful parent-teacher meetings, involving as well (at times) the teachers of the regular classes, should make for increasing understanding and success.

8. It is planned that a just-begun contact with the Zurich-area psychological counselor for visually impaired persons will be developed into a teamwork relationship. This young man, visually impaired himself and having studied as a child in both a residential school and a regular neighborhood one, is highly interested in integrated experiencing for handicapped as well as so-called

normal youngsters. He is eager to help all of us concerned with integrating activities work together more effectively.

In closing, it is felt appropriate to strees once again the importance of children's learning to know each other in all degrees and areas of differing and likeness, so that our world can be one of more human understanding. Instead of thinking of extremes in terms of no integration or total integration, perhaps we would do well to aim, for every child called exceptional, at an integrating experience in a group which functioning at a somewhat higher level than the child himself. For many such children this can well mean varying degrees of meaningful involvement in the regular classroom, the "hows" of which must be evolved in terms of local culture, educational system and philosophy and the individuals concerned. Whether a youngster be educationally home-based in a special day school, a residential one or one or another kind of special class, if integrating to some degree into the regular classroom is felt important it can be meaningfully done!

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Suggested Relevant Reading - please note the preponderance of American references and accept my apology for my lack of familiarity with the literature re: integrated programming from other parts of the world.

The I.C.E.V.H. Educator and International List - Schools for Visually Handicapped Children, publications of The International Council for Education of the Visually Handicapped (address - c/o Helen Keller International, Inc.: 22 West 17 Street, New York, New York 10011), are examples of materials by which information of international scope can be obtained. Probably other handicapping areas have similar organizations and publications.

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